"Don't get it twisted!": James Cone, his black theology of liberation, and what it means for 21st century Adventism

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"Don't get it twisted" is a phrase commonly utilized in African-American communities; and when one employs such vernacular, they are uttering a warning—be it serious or tongue-in-cheek—that says (to place it in so-called standard English) "Don't misunderstand what I'm saying" or "Let me make myself perfectly clear."

So having said that, please don't misunderstand what I'm saying AND let me make myself perfectly clear—DON'T GET IT TWISTED—when I stand in front of you and audaciously state that twenty-first century Seventh-day Adventism can learn a lot from a twentieth century African-American theologian whose life experiences and convictions led him to write, "In the struggle for truth in a revolutionary age, there can be no principles of truth, no absolutes, not even God."[1]

James Cone—Background and Theological Overview

James Hal Cone (1938-2018) grew up in Arkansas during the age of Jim Crow[2] (1940s to early-1950s). Cone spoke of attending segregated schools, drinking from "colored" water fountains and watching movies from balconies—as sitting near the front of a movie theater was prohibited by law.[3] He writes, "While struggling to understand how whites reconciled racism with their Christian identity, I also encountered an uncritical faith in many black churches."[4]

Cone sought to integrate theology and the struggle for justice, doing so by calling the church to task for its sins of omission. Cone wrote, "To be sure, many congregations have food programs, jail and hospital ministries, and other special projects designed to 'help' the needy and unfortunate ones. But such programs are not designed to challenge the capitalist system that

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[1] James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia & New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1970), 47. Although, to be fair to Cone, this is seen more so in his earlier writings than his later writings. From this perspective, he differs no less from scriptural luminaries who struggled with occasional bouts of xenophobia, such as Miriam and Aaron (Numbers 12), the disciples of Jesus (John 4), and Peter (Acts 10; Gal 2:11-12).

[2] Jim Crow, a coined term based on a theatrical character who served as the stereotyped Black of his day, represented a slate of laws designed to suppress the voting rights of black men. These included reading tests, poll taxes, and the grandfather clause. Although women earned the right to vote in 1920, strong suppression of the rights of black women to vote held sway until the 1960s.

[3] These next several paragraphs contain references from my dissertation, "A Preaching Program to Instill Social Consciousness in African-American Churches in Dallas/Fort Worth, Texas. DMin diss., Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University, 2005.

[4] Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983), 186-187.

creates human misery."[5] Cone continued, "It is because churches are so much a reflection of the values of the society in which they exist that they also have a serious credibility problem among people who regard their poverty and imprisonment as a by-product of an unjust social order."[6]

Cone's prescient language seems provocatively radical to many approximately 35 years after the aforementioned quotes; yet when interpreted in the light of 2020, serves as a necessary wake-up call to professed Christians. Cone's theology of the nature of God and His relationship with His creation dictates that "either God is identified with the oppressed to the point that their experience becomes God's experience, or God is a God of racism."[7]

Cone's concern about the often-portrayed picture of a God who is primarily transcendent, with diminished focus on his immanence, is that such a focus "has often prevented church people from seeing the correct relationship between theology and politics, the preaching of the gospel to the poor and its implementation in society."[8] Cone continues, "The task of the church is more than preaching sermons about justice and praying for the liberation of all. The church must be the agent of justice and liberation about which it proclaims."[9] Unfortunately, however, "too many black churches are more concerned about buying and building new church structures than they are about feeding, clothing, and housing the poor. Too many pastors are more concerned about how to manipulate people for an increase in salary than they are about liberating the oppressed from socio-political bondage."[10]

Contents of Cone's Liberation Theology

The 30-year-old PhD graduate in systematic theology (Garrett Theological Seminary) saw his groundbreaking inaugural book *Black Theology and Black Power* published in 1969, serving to stir the theological waters in the wake of Martin Luther King's assassination a year earlier. A year later—50 years ago—his seminal *A Black Theology of Liberation* was published. In his second book he systematizes Black Theology, addressing concepts of revelation and inspiration, the nature of God, the nature of humanity, Christology, ecclesiology, and eschatology. For the purpose of this brief paper, we will only examine portions of the first chapter of his book—addressing the contents of theology—with hopes of ascertaining any applicability to Seventh-day Adventism in the 21st century.

For Cone, the starting point for theological expression and understanding was the plight of humanity. If the gospel remains unrecognizable when it comes into contact with the human condition, it ceases to be true theology. According to Cone, "[T]heology ceases to be a theology of the gospel when it fails to arise out of the community of the

[5] Cone, *Speaking the Truth: Ecumenism, Liberation, and Black Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdsman, 1986), 112.
[6] Ibid., 113.
[7] Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 63.
[8] Cone, Speaking the Truth, 117.
[9] Ibid., 124.
[10] Ibid., 122.

oppressed."[11] For him, "Christian theology is a theology of liberation. It is *a rational study of the being of God in the world in light of the existential situation of an oppressed community, relating the forces of liberation to the essence of the gospel*, which is Jesus Christ."[12] After quoting Exodus 19:4, 5a, he states, "God's call of this people is related to their oppressed condition and to his own liberating activity already seen in the Exodus. *You have seen what I did!*"[13] Theology does not exist in the abstract; rather, it manifests itself relationally as well as existentially.[14] More than that, however, liberation includes more than freedom from spiritual bondage. It literally includes emancipation from oppression.

For the balance of Cone's book, he develops his theology of liberation by distinguishing Black Theology from white theology. For starters, he states "From the very beginning to the present day, American white theological thought has been 'patriotic,' either by defining the theological task independently of black suffering (the liberal northern approach) or by defining Christianity as compatible with white racism (the conservative southern approach). In both cases theology becomes a servant of the state, and that can only mean death to black people."[15] For Cone, neither the liberal northern approach nor the conservative southern approach is incarnational in the black life setting. He goes on to say "The appearance of Black Theology on the American scene then is due exclusively to the failure of white religionists to relate the gospel of Jesus to the pain of being black in a white racist society…. Black Theology is a theology of liberation because it is a theology which arises from an identification with the oppressed blacks of America, seeking to interpret the gospel of Christ in the light of the black condition."[16] I would expand upon Cone's notion to indicate that Black Theology is Christian Theology in that its core principles can be applied to the dispossessed worldwide, the disenfranchised in Appalachia, and the demonized in public schools.

But don't get it twisted. Cone moves back and forth between blackness as an ethnic and cultural reality and as something symbolic of a larger reality. He writes, "[B]lackness is an ontological symbol and a visible reality which best describes

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[11] Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 17-18.
[12] Ibid., 17.
[13] Ibid., 18.
[14] God pronounced the Decalogue from Mount Sinai within the context of relationship (Exod 20:2) and Moses voiced the fourth commandment in existential language (Deut 5:15).
[15] Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 22.
[16] Ibid., 23.

what oppression means in America. The extermination of Indians, the persecution of the Jews, the oppression of Mexican Americans, and every other conceivable inhumanity done in the name of God and country—these brutalities can be analyzed in terms of America's inability to recognize humanity in persons of color…. Blackness, then, stands for all victims of oppression who realize that their humanity is inseparable from man's liberation from whiteness."[17] If *blackness* is an ontological symbol, then *whiteness* must also be an ontological symbol representing oppressive forces.[18]

In wrapping up his argument for the need of a Black Theology, Cones posits that "white people are in no position whatever to question the legitimacy of Black Theology…. It is not surprising that the people who reject blackness in theology are usually whites who do not question the blue-eyed white Christ."[19] It should be considered that whiteness is an ontological symbol. So also is the "blue-eyed white Christ" in that Eurocentrism thoroughly permeates Christian worship in general—regardless of denominational affiliation. And such worship is often hidden under the guise of "multicultural" worship within "multicultural" settings.

Cone proceeds to discuss Black Theology within the Black Community. "Theology," he writes, "is the community's continued attempt to define in every generation its reason for being in the world. A community that does not analyze its existence theologically is a community that does not care what it says or does. It is a community which has no identity."[20] Each community must continually determine its identity, purpose, and function—not ceding that responsibility to others who will gladly do so if given permission to do so. Individual communities must resist the pull from the majority culture to theologically analyze their existence within the framework of the majority culture, for if such necessary resistance is not exercised, it becomes akin to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah having new names imposed upon them by their overlords (Dan 1:6-7).

Another model of theologically analyzing one's existence while recognizing the existence of an alternate framework can be found in the Jacob-Laban account (Gen 29-31). Laban becomes metaphor for an oppressive and dominate culture while Jacob becomes metaphor for an ontological reality that has to scratch and

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[17] Ibid., 27-28.

[18] Don't get it twisted. It's a symbol, and not intended as a broad, sweeping, monolithic statement about white people.

[19] Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 29.

[20] Ibid., 30-31.

claw against all odds for anything that can be rightfully secured. Jacob refuses to allow Laban and his disgusted sons to define his reality. Instead, Jacob forcefully and adamantly speaks up for himself. "These twenty years I have been with you…. That which was torn by beasts I did not bring to you; I bore the loss of it…. In the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night, and my sleep departed from my eyes. Thus I have been in your home twenty years…you have changed my wages ten times. Unless the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac had been with me, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed." (Gen 31:38-42, NKJV).

Cone articulates it thusly: "Black Theology seeks to articulate the theological self-determination of black people."[21] In Alex Haley's *Roots*, two story lines grippingly dominate the first two generations of his researched lineage. The first revolves around Kunta Kinte's being beaten until he gave in to his master's wishes to refer to himself by *Toby*, the name given to him by his master. In doing so, he acquiesced to effectively renouncing his family-ascribed name. Yet his desire to define himself and his heritage was never extinguished in that he insisted that his daughter, born later, be named Kizzee ("stay put")—his declaration that the horrors that befell him when he was captured and shipped across the Atlantic Ocean would not befall her.

Cone further proceeds to address black consciousness. He writes, "Black consciousness is an attempts to recover a past deliberately destroyed by slave masters, an attempt to revive old survival symbols and create new ones…. First, this country legally defined black people outside the realm of humanity, decreeing that blacks were animals and that their own enslavement was best both for them and the society as a whole…."[22] Black consciousness should not only recover the past; but it should also actualize a present that is obscured by revisionist history in textbooks and a guiding philosophy that argues the past is in the past and has no power to be prologue. This happens in the church and in church schools—not just in the larger society.

And don't get it twisted. Blacks are still defined outside the realm of humanity. I shall never forget attending a staff meeting in a setting different from my current one; and while speaking of my mother in-law as one who birthed 10 children, a person sitting nearby—who was not a part of the conversation—spoke

[21] Ibid., 33.
[22] Ibid., 37-38.

up and compared my mother in-law to a rabbit. DON'T GET IT TWISTED! IT STILL HAPPENS IN THE 21st CENTURY!!

A Way Forward for 21st century Adventism

John utilized the concept of Logos (John 1:1), Paul employed the thoughts of ancient poets (Acts 17:26-28), and I'll be so profane as to summarize this paper with a foundation that was laid in part by Dr. Cone. Time will only allow me a few observations.

First, the Church that I love must live in relationship on a global scale, implementing *in toto* the words of Paul that we are neither ___ or ___, for we all all one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28). And now that I've gotten that obligatory statement out of the way, let me move on to three others upon which we seldom elaborate.

Second, we need to re-examine elements of our worship—music, preaching, liturgy—that allow for the beauty of our diversity to shine through when many cultures are represented in larger worship setting. Too often, multiculturalism is a catch phrase for many ethnicities assembling under one roof; yet the heavenward expression is still monocultural with an occasional exception for special events. Along with that, we as Blacks must be (or remain) unapologetically black in our liturgical expression. And we must not allow others to define what's acceptable or unacceptable unless there is scriptural foundation for such.[23] Cone would ask, "'How are we going to survive in a world which deems black humanity as an illegitimate form of human existence?'"[24]

Third, we need a revival of prophetic preaching in the spirit and power of Elijah, Amos, Micah, and other Old Testament luminaries. We need women and men who stand in the pulpit, unapologetically speaking for God—even if His Word disturbs the status quo. Lenora Tubbs Tisdale says that prophetic preaching "is the kind of preaching that can 'get ministers in trouble' with their congregations

[23] I am reminded of this statement in the *SDA Church Manual*: "Any melody partaking of the nature of *jazz*, rock, or related hybrid forms…will be shunned." (emphasis supplied) (Church Manual, 19th ed., Silver Spring, MD: GC Secretariat, 150 [2016]).
[24] Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 34-35.

because it often goes against societal norms, pronouncing not only grace but also God's judgment on human action or inaction."[25]

Fourth, and most critical, our K-12 educational system must be more inclusive in its textbooks. Such inclusivity must not only be evidenced within the material contained in the books; but in the authors of those books as well. This also applies in baccalaureate, graduate, and post-graduate education.[26]

This really is a vision for the future. Don't get it twisted!

[25] Lenora Tubbs Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching: A Practical Approach* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 3.

[26] It would do well for colleges, universities, seminaries, and departments within seminaries to conduct an audit of its learning materials as well as pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning.